

Houston Planning Commission
Urban Subcommittee
Wednesday, September 28, 2005
Summary

Attendance:

Barbara Tennant, Etan M. Mirwis, Ron Lindsey, Richard Farias, Steve Flippo, Thomas Colbert, Roberta Burroughs, Catherine Burst, Rey de la Reza

Right of Way (ROW) Dedication & Reduced Building Lines

The Planning Commission is frequently asked to grant variances from the required ROW dedication and the building set backs in the urban area. Decisions to approve or deny such requests are generally based on traffic patterns in the area, the placement of existing structures on the block, likelihood of additional redevelopment perceived development trends, and any prior decisions regarding ROW on that particular block or nearby blocks.

Discussion on ROW:

Should other uses for ROW be considered such as green space, wider sidewalks, stormwater improvements, etc?

The current standard for residential streets is 50' of ROW and 24 to (?) 28' of pavement. Local streets in many older neighborhoods often have a more narrow ROW and pavement section and structures built on or within a few feet of the ROW line. Many urban streets are open ditch.

The current standard for non-residential streets is 60' of ROW.

Streets must be able to meet functional needs: vehicular traffic circulation, pedestrian access, street trees, fire and EMS access, garbage pick up, above- and below-ground utilities (storm/power/water/sewer/telephone), etc.

Streetscape defines neighborhood character.

Sidewalks and trees are needed on at least one side of a local street.

What's the purpose of ROW dedication?

Preserve existing conditions?

Offset impacts of new development (e.g., increased stormwater & density that come with increased impervious area & 5' building lines in areas that formerly had larger setbacks & lot sizes)?

Accommodate increased traffic flow?

Will open ditch streets be improved with curb and gutter in the future?

Suggestions

Consider space needs for required future tree plantings

Consider potential locations for future bike lanes

Establish one-way pairs in older neighborhoods to preserve narrow ROW

Use on-street parking prohibitions on one or both sides of very narrow local streets to preserve existing ROW

Some older neighborhoods may be added to street width exception areas.

A further defined street hierarchy system will identify which streets should be widened in the future and which can remain as they are.

Recommend reviewing City of Dallas' parkway planting areas for ideas.

4' sidewalk is too small for urban area- can't fit two people.

Use structural soil under sidewalks to help trees survive.

Select durable trees for urban area.

Ensure that required trees are being planted in a way that ensures their survival.

Tree mitigation in ROW should be required.

Recommend 5' sidewalks.

Urban area must be pedestrian oriented; therefore, to determine sufficient ROW width, begin with ROW line and work inward – street trees, sidewalk, then paving. begin with the sidewalk and work outward.

Decide which narrow streets will be preserved for mostly pedestrian use and limited vehicular traffic. Larger parallel streets will be primarily for traffic circulation.

Fence Rule- Sec. 42-159(c)(3) – allows 5' setback for single family lots when 16' shared drive is used. Restricts the location of any fence or wall up to eight feet high to a minimum of two feet from the property line along the street, and requires the two-foot area to be planted and maintained with landscaping.

This means that if the house is set back 5 feet and the fence is set back 2 feet, then 3 feet is left between the fence and the house, which is fairly unusable as a yard or for tree planting.

When you put that situation on a ROW of less than 50', you often don't have enough space between the street paving and property line to accommodate street trees and sidewalks, especially with open ditch streets.

The purpose of setting the fence/wall back 2 feet may have been to ensure people have space to use the sidewalk without being hemmed in by a wall, but you'd have to ask Marlene to be sure.

Questions?

Is 28' of paving always necessary?

Is 20' of paving adequate?

Can we set a policy for when to grant ROW widening variances based on how much space between the paving edge and ROW line is necessary to accommodate sidewalks, street trees and utilities?

Establish a preferred cross-section for neighborhood streets case by case?

Discussion on Reduced Building Line Variances

The Planning Commission is frequently asked to grant reduced building line variances along streets in the urban area, especially in Midtown. Chapter 42 provides some performance standards for reducing building lines along some major thoroughfares. These are limited to:

major thoroughfares with planned width of 80' or less

15' building line for non-single family residential uses

5' building line for commercial retail center

0' building line for commercial retail center that provides arcade.

Impacts of these performance standards are:

5' and 0' setbacks for retail commercial centers next to office, hotel, multifamily which would be required to set back 15' to 25'.

Projects along major thoroughfares with planned width greater than 80', such as Montrose and Kirby, require variance for reduced setback.

Projects along collector and local streets with ROWs of 80', such as Bagby and McGowen, require variance for reduced setback.

Zero building line variances can negatively impact street trees, both existing and required new trees. Examples include the Cortlandt Square project in Midtown, various Med Center projects.

On substandard ROWs, reduced building lines can result in inadequate space for sidewalks and street trees.

Discussion to be continued next time:

Project examples

Suggested additional performance standards and modifications to existing performance standards.

Next Steps

P&D staff will prepare draft concept paper for review at next meeting

Next Meeting: November 9, 2005